

THE GIRL WITH THE RARERIFE LIPS
AND RAVEN HAIR

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

I lay it at the feet of that accursed Evil Eye
transmuted by inheritance!

My God, when I think of it!

The poison of heredity had infected and
wrought upon me until I was as free of moral
responsibility as the instinct of a common beast!
My dual existence was a predisposition destined
at birth by the curse of a predominating sin,
and the vile ferments agitated and writhing in
my blood fought and withered with themselves
in that fatal embrace of powers that balanced
me like a pendulum between the hopes of heaven
and the despare of hell.

Five years from home! Little Rosebud was
thirteen then, my baby sweetheart. Dear little
Rosebud! So far away! Could I forget her?
She and mother were the only two I had to love,
and the curse was bitterer because of that. Oh,
why should generations pass without contaminay
or polution and the accursed curse select me at
last its victim! I could not return to them now
—no—NEVER! For murder and sin were
written in my heart.

My soul cried out in agony!

Thus I soliloquized this eventful eve, treading with stylish indifference the white moonstruck flags, bound for the Colonel's ball.

My face was highly respectable. Why should it not be? Experience of inherent vice had not raised and squared my jaw, had not destroyed the roundness of my mouth nor bloodshot my eyes.

I passed on, striking the flags a warning note now and then with my stick, and came to the Colonel's.

The affair was like all others to me, stolid and indifferent, a nauseating fetich worshiped by those I must temporarily copy. The Colonel's daughter penned me lugubriously on a black divan at her feet, and then proceeded to entertain me with a cosmological idea of motion—indeed, she had almost told Mama Mr. Dunning was a cosmopolite, and Mama just *doted* on them, and dancing was a motion, and a very nice one, too, wasn't it?

The hint struck deep, but I preferred to sit it out.

And then something happened. I looked up.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I fear I am intruding!"

It was only a girl who had passed too close! Only a momentary glimpse of a fleeting face with rareripe lips and raven hair! Only a voice

of dulcet sweetness asking forgiveness! Oh, my God! My face turned cold and ashen. Her name was Lady Terrill.

"I am ill, Miss Macaskie, please pardon me," I choked.

In the conservatory I ordered an ice and hid myself behind a luxuriant wall of foliage. Like an electric shock of poignant intensiveness the soul of the stranger had burned into mine for just one moment, and in the sudden shaft piercing the testaceous shell of my baneful personality I detected the precursory gleam of a heavenly moral restitution.

What effected me? Was it her wonderful beauty? Never had I seen such ravishingly crimson lips. Could I picture anywhere in my imagination hair like hers, of the deepest raven, drawn low over the dark-pink cheeks in rich, silken waves and laughing with transient lights that lost themselves in the deeper lustre of her pool-like eyes? No, I could not. And no, I argued, it is not her beauty that effects me. I am Dick Dunning the cosmopolite and I have seen beautiful women before.

I hurried to the dressing room.

The love-knot which in a moment of reckless fatuity I had let Miss Macaskie put in my tie was a trifle too discriminating, and might incline the Lady Terrill to singular effeminate impressions of her own, more distressing to me

than embarrassing, and an outward display of this facetious buffoonery in open society would, I felt indubitably assured, discredit me in the eyes of the lovely stranger.

With an ingenious artlessness that was as much a new factor in my fallow existence as energy is to freshly made wine I proceeded to dissolve the intricate knot before a mirror in a flower-strewn alcove. I had scarcely fingered the single bow to my satisfaction, and had not yet drawn the loop, when another face appeared beside mine in the glass. It was the girl with the rareripe lips and raven hair.

"May I help you?" she asked.

What a flood of drunken thoughts intoxicated me with their promised indulgences as I turned from the mirror to face the beautiful apparition! Dick Dunning of the lower elements! Mad fancies careered through my brain, for Lady Terrill was fast—very fast—or she would not have sought me, a stranger, in one of the most secluded corners of the great house. Oh, God, how my fancies run! I tried to smile, and bowed low over the temptingly little hand.

"If you please, Miss —" I paused suggestively. The white hands fluttered at my throat for only an instant, and were done.

"You know my name," she said freezingly. "I do not desire an introduction, Mr. Dick Dunning! Good-night!"

My soul sunk. My masculine pride was crushed. I left the ball and stole like some hunted thing of crime for my favorite opium den, the Lady Terrill's eyes leering scornfully at me from every moonshaft. Thus I came to Kippi Ki Yi's Opium ranch.

My God, what a sight!

"Ha, Dick," I cried. "Providence and the devil have forsaken you, so now for the one quick leap that transmutes you from the race of a Creator to the soul and Satan of a gorgeous hell!"

Scarce had I muttered this anathema against my being when the Chinaman came in. A woman was with him, her face covered with a heavy veil. With a little nod she indicated my direction, and Kippi Ki Yi seated her opposite me at the table.

"Sleet—sleet," hissed the Chinaman in my ear, with a repulsive chuckle deep down in his throat. "Oakum drunk—veil off—sleet—sleet—sleet—boo'ful gal!" and with this parting hint the yellow devil slunk away.

It was evident the girl heard and understood him. She loosened her gloves and tearing them from her hands flung them beside mine on the floor.

"Oh, God!" she cried. "At last—at last—my subversion is accomplished!"

The veiled head sunk down upon the table

and the stranger's whole form was convulsed with a throbbing storm of anguish. How to tender my condolence mystified me. I coughed and squirmed and when I had done coughing and squirming in my chair, nearly upset the table with a tremendous artificial sneeze, and what these requisites failed to perform singly was accomplished by the whole.

"I—I—am sorry I annoy you," she whispered piteously. "Oh, please help me!"

"That I will," I returned gently, and reaching across the scattered outfit I took her soft little hand in mine. "Only one question, poor little friend, and I will help you if I can. Have you resisted temptation until tonight? Are you still free from—"

The girl snatched her hand away almost fiercely.

"You insinuate that which reproaches me too bitterly to tolerate without a slight defence," she declared. "Your catechism may be kindly disposed, but the presumption that I threw myself despairingly at your feet in a paroxysm of imbecility precludes any desire on my part to accept your sympathy. Listen, then! Would I not be a fool to petition the advise of an opium sot and anticipate relief from one already submerged in that terrible chaos on the brink of which I stand?"

"But if beside you there stood another, the

one you so pitilessly condemn, would you not exhibit a little clemency and cry God Speed to a disheartened soul about to die?" I asked.

"And you are situated thus?" she faltered.

"Until tonight all was well," I whispered.

"And tonight—tonight——" she cried eagerly. "Why tonight?"

Something like a nausea knawing at my heart seized me then with a suddenness that drove the blood from my face, and I fancied in the impassioned voice I again detected an echo of the cold words that exiled me from the Colonel's ball, "I do not desire an introduction, Mr. Dick Dunning! Good-night!"

"My God!" I cried.

"Tell me—tell me—why to-night?" she entreated.

"No—no—Oh, My God, I am dying!" I sobbed.

It was not the Lady Terrill's voice I heard, not the Lady Terrill's lovely face I pictured in my heart, but another whose dark eyes and sweet love beckoned me still from the path of hell.

"O, My Rosebud—my little Rosebud!" I cried.

The stranger was no longer a stranger. She tore off her vail and hat and in the rareripe lips and raven hair I saw now my sweet little red Rosebud grown into a gorgeous flower.

"Dick—Dick—I came to save you! Your

little sweetheart of thirteen has grown into a beautiful woman for you. The Ocean Greyhound sails at high noon to-morrow—and we sail with it!

My little sweetheart and I are far out upon the deep blue ocean. Long ere this the white-tiled roofs and glistening sands of Bombay have sunk below the horizon, and we two sit alone in the first waning light of the dying moon, and dream of mother and home. The deck is shrouded with the leaden hue of gathering darkness as I whisper a word in my darling's ear,

“We are going home, my Rosebud!”

THE END

Very soon after the appearance of this remarkable story in the Detroit newspaper, Fred Janette, who had returned from New York, took me into his den and with unusual seriousness explained to me at length why I should stick as closely as possible to stories for boys, and leave love affairs alone. He made me understand that a considerable time must elapse before papers would pay me for what I wrote, and that meanwhile a very good practice for me would be the writing of a juvenile serial. I followed his advice and that winter wrote two serials of about twenty thousand words each, entitled “The Rebel Quintette” and “Fire-

lock of the Range,” the age-yellowed and pencil-scrawled manuscripts of which I now have.

My mother had fitted up my bedroom with a desk and table, and about this time my father bought me an old second-hand Caligraph typewriter, and made me a stand for it out of a discarded sewing-machine, the top of which he covered with yellow oil-cloth. Up until that time I had written with a pencil, and on any kind of paper I could get, chiefly wrapping-paper from the stores, which I cut into sheets. A few years ago a large part of my earliest manuscripts were destroyed, but I still have a big pine packing-case filled with them, and between the ages of twelve and fifteen I must have written more than a hundred stories ranging in length from five hundred to twenty thousand words, so when youngsters come to me now, and older people as well, and tell me how discouraged they are because they have written half a dozen stories without getting into print, I take them down to my dungeon-room and show them that precious box of voiceless but significant reminders of my own years of early toil, before even a local, small-town paper recognized my genius; and then I show them even more imposing stacks of manuscripts, hundreds of thousands of words written in later years, and all before I became the proud and triumphant